Persuasive effects of extended metaphor

in fictional works: a look into the importance

of critical thinking skills as an attribute

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ABSTRACT: Extended metaphor, a longer and more complex version of a simple metaphor, persuades readers of fiction with benefits that revolve around thinking critically. However, some believe that extended metaphors impede critical thinking because of their ambiguity and difficulty in spotting them. From their perspective, conspicuous indicators need to be attached to these simplistic literary devices in order to accurately analyze a fictional author’s purpose. However, unlike in science where theories are relatively narrow in scope and can be validated or disproved, meaning in fiction encapsulates so many possibilities not necessarily defined by right or wrong. Language in a fictional story can dynamically transform over time, and its meaning with it. Readers of fiction are entitled to their opinion(s) about a story, but according to a former professor, if they attempt to explain why they formed an opinion, it becomes a fact. Of course, this fact can be inductively strengthened: readers of fiction utilize a complex thought process to convey what an author’s purpose could be when reasoning with extended metaphors – which poses a strong inductive argument. Strong enough in fact, to claim that critical thinking arguably comprises the most important factor in why extended metaphor is more successful than simple metaphor in persuading an audience of readers.

KEYWORDS: *critical, thinking, extended, metaphor, symbolism, rhetoric, discourse, fiction, Life, Pi, Martel, Metamorphosis, Kafka*

Simple metaphors have become an important component of our language for comparing two different objects, and are often carried on as extended metaphors in fiction for their many benefits – including critical thinking skills. Ivie (1996) describes critical thinking in a metaphorical context, “Critical thinking highlights the importance... [to] think reflectively whenever we carefully examine the assumptions underlying our beliefs. Assumptions… are frequently expressed in the language of metaphor” (p. 67). As far as I know, the language of simple metaphors employ three words – two of the words are expressed as objects, and one word, *is,* links the two together. Basically, characteristics of the second object help indirectly describe the first object. Recently, I learned from an e-mail that simple metaphors can be written in more than three words (as extended metaphors) to provide more detail about the two objects being compared. Extended metaphors mitigate the ambiguity between similar characteristics of two objects by providing more description, which allows a more vivid image to be formed. According to Littlemore (2002), “subjects typically reported vivid images in reaction to metaphors. They used images significantly more frequently to encode metaphorical sentences than non-metaphorical sentences” (Image Formation section, para. 3). For this reason, fictional authors make good use of extended metaphor. As a matter of fact, many fictional stories – including *Life of Pi* and *The Metamorphosis* – have been labeled as an entire extended metaphor. This suggests that individual extended metaphors within a fictional story could promote critical thinking for readers by encouraging them to look for interrelated associations, ultimately persuading them.

Fictional authors may use one primary extended metaphor to convey their purpose and persuade a reader to constantly improve their critical thinking skills. Every story is written by an author with a specific purpose in mind – otherwise a story would lack structure and lead to an indeterminate conclusion. Obviously, each reader is going to interpret what an author is attempting to accomplish differently – especially when the extended metaphors become increasingly difficult to associate for meaning. On the surface, it appears that extended metaphor allows an author to more emphatically achieve his or her purpose. According to Batema and Media (n.d.), “Authors use… [extended metaphors] often… to help the reader understand a character, object or point of view by comparing those subjects to something the audience already understands” (para. 1). This induces an important question: in what ways is extended metaphor persuasive in fictional literary works? It almost seems like these extended metaphors are scattered and cleverly disguised as part of a bigger picture in fiction – not solely one extended metaphor that encompasses an entire story. If this is the case, then each individual metaphorical meaning must be logically encoded and combined with an author’s purpose into a holistic vision. In turn, even if a reader ends up being “wrong” about the author’s purpose, the critical thinking skills that enable them to understand a fictional story should improve.

BACKGROUND AND SECONDARY RESEARCH

Simple metaphor structure and background information

Simple metaphors differ from literal messages in terms of structure, content, and comprehension, but can both be very effective in persuasion. Many people have the capability of using metaphorical and literal language to persuade others. Like any other form of communication, this involves a sender delivering a message to least one receiver. A sender that attempts to persuade about an object with literal language will describe it using adjectives, opinions, and/or facts. Conversely, if a message is delivered with one object being used to describe another object, the sender seeks to persuade with metaphorical language. All simple metaphors have the same basic structure and purpose as noted by Sopory and Dillard (2002), “Metaphors are linguistic comparisons of the form ‘A is B.’… we call A the target and B the base… a fundamental feature of the metaphor… [is] that meaning is passed from B to A” (p. 383). Since the base only represents one word and does not exactly spell out which characteristics should be applied to the target, a receiver will be unaware of the meaning if they do not possess at least some knowledge about the base. Also, there will always be variation in how a receiver comprehends the meaning. A simple metaphor’s structure, wording, and how the transferred meaning is comprehended all contribute to the effectiveness of its persuasion.

Simple metaphor comprehension

In order for a simple metaphor to elicit a fictional reader (receiver) to be persuaded, three main theories describe how they need to be comprehended: literal-primacy, salience-imbalance, and structure-mapping. Sopory and Dillard (2002) explain about the literal-primacy theory, which “sees metaphor as exceptional language that is literally false… [that] require three stages in the process of understanding: (a) derive the literal meaning… (b) test whether the literal meaning makes sense… and (c) seek an alternative meaning” (p. 383-384). A reader spends cognitive effort to interpret the simple metaphor’s intended meaning and test it like an experiment to resolve internal tension. Salience-imbalance represents another theory of simple metaphor comprehension that places more of a focus on the metaphorical structure. According to Sopory and Dillard (2002), “Salience is defined as the relative importance of an attribute… A metaphorical expression of the type ‘A is B’ is understood by…attributes that have a low salience for the target and high salience for the base” (p. 384). This makes sense, considering transferred meaning is passed from the base to the target. On a different note, a simple metaphorical structure is simply a platform in the structure-mapping theory of simple metaphor comprehension, in which Gentner and Clement (1988) describe as a limitless number of associations somehow relating to an object that can be applied to another object – creating a map with an interconnected structure (p. 312). A reader attempting to understand a simple metaphor through structure-mapping seeks to reason how the target and base combine to create meaning. In all three theories, the effectiveness of persuasion through simple metaphor depends on a reader’s comprehension.

Criticism of simple metaphor

Like anything else, simple metaphors have pros and cons – some readers are not persuaded mainly because of their symbolism in fictional stories that are: too ambiguous, simple, and harmful to critical thought process. According to Deal (1968), “A critic desires a sign more than a symbol; he wants the author to point it out significantly, assuring that it is indeed a symbol, and so warn the critic to take heed of its symbolic value” (p.294). As Deal indicates, simple metaphors (symbols) may not necessarily be so apparent to notice – especially in a story. Also, simple metaphors can be interpreted in a number of different ways and certainly do not concretely explain about their respective meaning(s). Without this information, some readers feel prevented from understanding why an author decided to include various simple metaphors. Deal (1968) elaborates on why they desire to learn about the meaning behind the simple metaphors, “the critic wants the symbol adumbrated by portentousness; only then will he accord it the significance demanded by the author…story is too simple in its complexity for their critical tastes” (p. 294). Apparently to the critic, simple metaphors inhibit critical thinking skills about an author’s purpose and a story’s meaning, resulting in lower value and persuasiveness.

Benefits of simple metaphor

Despite criticism of simple metaphors, many fictional authors still choose to utilize them for their presumed benefits in persuasion, which includes improving critical thinking skills. According to Sopory and Dillard (2002), “metaphor is credited with the capacity to structure, transform, and create new knowledge, as well as evoke emotions, and influence evaluations… perhaps as a consequence, metaphor is ubiquitous in persuasion contexts” (p. 382).When a reader encounters a simple metaphor and subsequently discovers its meaning, cognitive tension has been resolved under the literal-primacy theory. Basically, a simple metaphor causes a reader to cycle through operant conditioning: the removal of an unpleasant stimulus (cognitive tension) quells negative reinforcement, and rewards a receiver with positive reinforcement in the form of a pleasurable reward: understanding the simple metaphor’s meaning (Coon and Mitterer, 2011, p. 262). As a result, the reader that resolves this internal conflict likely will perceive simple metaphors in a positive light and provide cordial evaluations of them. In addition, the basic structure of simple metaphor organizes the transfer of meaning from base to target; new knowledge about a target will be generated if it is relatively unfamiliar and comprehended under the salience-imbalance theory.

In addition, fiction provides an ideal place for simple metaphors to be expressed because it requires a reader to think very critically in search for a deeper meaning, which stimulates the frontal cortex of the brain. According to Hassler (2014), “metaphors are effective in writing because they allow for creativity and enliven language… by making connections and relating personal experiences to the objects being compared, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the text at hand” (para. 1). Arranging words in new ways through simple metaphor transforms and potentially produces new meaning. If a reader is able to associate what they have learned with what they already know from personal experience, this will stimulate even more areas of the brain – specifically, the amygdala and hippocampus – creating connections in long-term memory from a greater emotional response. Another benefit of simple metaphor is described by Hassler (2014): “As a literary device, metaphors encourage the reader to think and interpret various literary elements in a meaningful way through the development of characters, plot, settings, and imagery” (para. 1). Interestingly, critical thinking skills – a notable flaw from the point of view from critics of simple metaphor – have the capability of being a benefit as well, depending on the reader. Collectively, these benefits of simple metaphor appear to persuade a reader by enhancing their emotional experience in fiction by forcing them to think critically for the meaning of a story.

Extended metaphor structure and background information

Just like simple metaphors can transform language in fiction, they can be transformed themselves into more complicated extended metaphors that require deeper thinking ability, which affects both criticism and persuasion. When simple metaphors are carried on past the basic structure of A is B, it becomes an extended metaphor. Houston (2012) explains the main facet of how an extended metaphor differs from a simple metaphor: “extended metaphors… take two (sometimes more) concepts and evaluate them over a series of sentences to create a more intricate picture of how one thing is like the other… [and] use complex logic… to flesh out the argument” (Extended Metaphor section, para. 1). Typically when these two unrelated objects are being compared in an extended metaphor, the reader is only made aware of the base. Think of an extended metaphor as a simple metaphor with a target and no base, occurring anywhere within a passage of unrestricted length that ranges from one sentence to an entire story (Houston, Extended Metaphors section, para. 1). Even though the target may be described into greater detail and mentioned a number of times, the simple metaphor can potentially be missed because of the exclusion of the target, and therefore the entire extended metaphor as well. While extended metaphors differ in length and structural organization, they share many similarities with simple metaphors, but with increased complexity: transfer of meaning, comprehension, criticism, and benefits. Many fictional authors have employed extended metaphors in their works for this reason, but the extended metaphors may not stop after a transition to unrelated text (i.e. they don’t remain on the same page). Even more cognitive effort is required to remember intricate details that connect two widely separated extended metaphors; a reader will experience greater internal tension, but receive a greater reward (pleasure) if able to resolve it, potentially experiencing more persuasion from thinking so critically.

Extended metaphor example in Metamorphosis

Franz Kafka, author of many influential fictional works – including *Metamorphosis*, a short story containing many interrelated extended metaphors scattered throughout to increase persuasion through critical thinking. Ralph Freedman (1990) noticed one particular extended metaphor: “The mortal wound inflicted by the father with the unfortunate apple…affects the core of Gregor’s self. The wound eats more and more deeply towards the center of his self” (p. 219). In this situation, the unfortunate apple serves as the base, and an insult likely represents the target. A second base (the wound) can be described with a target consisting of emotional pain. Further analysis from Freedman (1990) indicates a second extended metaphor later in the story that contributed to Gregor’s downfall: “But after his last foray into humanity, his fatal wound, his last response to his sister’s music, self-consciousness begins to dim and, with it, his sense of time” (p. 219). Clearly, the wound connects the two extended metaphors, so it is really just one separated by many pages. If a reader is able to notice this intricate connection and logically interpret the meaning, they likely will be more persuaded by extended metaphor because of the critical thought process involved.

Developing an experimental purpose from previous research

Exactly how effective are extended metaphors in persuasion? Based on previous research under neutral conditions from Sopory and Dillard (2002), metaphors elicit the most persuasion under a few circumstances:

The data suggest that the persuasive impact of metaphor is maximized when the audience is familiar with the metaphor target, the metaphor is novel, is used at the start of the message, is single, and nonextended… the results reported here… should be viewed as a platform from which to launch further inquiry… on the metaphor-persuasion relationship (p. 413).

This has prompted the desire to further investigate whether simple or extended metaphor is more persuasive, and the role critical thinking plays (benefit or flaw).

PRIMARY RESEARCH, METHODOLOGY, AND FINDINGS SECTION

In order to investigate whether extended metaphors more effectively persuade an audience of fictional readers over simple metaphors (with an in-depth look into critical thinking skills), I opted to go with a survey. In my opinion, what a survey lacks in depth, it makes up for with pure volume using preset questions. Also, more responses from the survey should provide a more representative sample in which to analyze data from. A total of 14 questions were initially created consisting of: 3 questions juxtaposing simple metaphors with their extended metaphor counterparts (as shown below), 6 questions focusing solely on the benefits and flaws of extended metaphors, and 2 additional questions (student’s major and enjoyment of reading). Prior to organizing these questions into a Microsoft Word document with the consent form as the title page, I had three peers in my microbiology lab fill out their answers onto a single handwritten survey on March 16th, 2016. I subsequently printed 40 hard copies and passed them out to CMU students on the first two floors of the library on March 18th, 2016. After collecting the 40 surveys, I then had 2 more CMU students fill out answers on surveys that had recently been collected (they just filled out their answers next to someone else’s). Initially, I had hoped to determine if extended metaphors receive higher marks of persuasion over simple metaphors. After consultation, the focus became centered on critical thinking skills through extended metaphor (as depicted in figure 3 below). Outside of that, the plan was to analyze data to see if anything else of significance could be determined; figure 2 includes findings that help explain critical thinking through extended metaphor as well. To better understand figure 1 and figure 2, more description of the x-axis labels are provided below:

X-axis labels of figure 1:

***Passage #1 with metaphor:*** Gregor’s father is throwing core-piercing apples at Gregor

***Passage #1 with extended metaphor:*** “The mortal wound inflicted by the father with the unfortunate apple… affects the core of Gregor’s self. The wound eats more deeply towards the center of his self” (Freeman, 1990, p. 219).

***Passage #2 with metaphor:*** Gregor couldn’t control his little legs (as an insect).

***Passage #2 with extended metaphor:*** “He had only the many little legs… which he could not seem to control. If he meant to bend one, it would be the first to stretch itself out, if he finally succeeded in enforcing his will with one leg, all the rest worked furiously, as if liberated, in extreme, painful agitation” (Kafka, 2012, p.129).

***Passage #3 with metaphor:*** Pi is eating a piece of fruit from the cannibalistic island.

***Passage #3 with extended metaphor:*** “Many trees on the perimeter of the heart of the forest whose bark had been practically shredded… It was here that I found the tree… It seemed to have fruit… The fruit was a human tooth… Understanding dawned upon me” (Martel, 2001, p. 351, 353-354).

X-axis labels of figure 2:

***Strengthen story*** = extended metaphors strengthen the characters, plot, settings, and story.

***More description*** = extended metaphors provide more description, allowing for better mental images to be formed.

***Critical thinking*** = extended metaphors improve critical thinking because of the cognitive effort required in deciphering them.

***More evoked emotion*** = extended metaphors evoke more emotion.

Figure 1: Comparing the three passages of simple metaphors with extended metaphors to gauge which of the two is more persuasive (2016)

20

25

24

20

19

26

**Number of CMU students**

**Passage #**

Figure 1 shows the number of CMU students that read three different passages on March 18th 2016 – each containing a different simple metaphor and extended metaphor – and decided which of the two was more persuasive. As can be seen, when CMU students were posed with a simple metaphor and a longer version of it (extended metaphor), the latter elicited more persuasion in two of the three passages. This result contradicts what Sopory and Dillard (2002) determined – that nonextended (simple) metaphors are more persuasive than extended metaphors. Clearly, CMU students responded well when a simple metaphor was described into greater detail as an extended metaphor. One student of CMU even deemed the passage #1 extended metaphor to be more persuasive, despite commenting about how violent throwing apples seemed. Without the target(s) of simple metaphor being explicitly stated within the extended metaphor, a reader can better visualize context with more detail. In turn, a critically thinking reader receives more clues to create connections and whittle down the potential target(s).

Figure 2: Important aspects of extended metaphor ranked in sequential order (2016)

**Important metaphor aspects**

More evoked emotion

Strengthen story

More description

Critical thinking

7

7

14

5

5

10

3

3

8

4

d

8

10

11

14

3

22

**Number of CMU students**

**Key**

Figure 2 displays the number of CMU students that ranked a list of four attributes of extended metaphor in sequential order from the most to least important, on March 18th 2016.

As seen in the chart above, of all four metaphorical attributes listed on the survey, critical thinking skills were ranked last by 14 CMU students – the most votes for the fourth rank.

This causes reason for concern, considering that the culture of the United States values critical thinking very highly because this skill complements self-sufficiency and individualism. It suggests that fiction may not be read by the everyday person to think deeply about the story and find out why the author has chosen to include certain extended metaphors. Since the survey included an extended metaphor neatly displayed as one coherent paragraph (even though the excerpts were scattered throughout each story), along with a representational simple metaphor and a literal meaning, perhaps this affected the results. After all, the students of CMU may not have been necessarily thinking how much actual critical thinking is involved in reading a fictional story – even when just reading for recreational enjoyment.

Figure 3: Comparing the opinions of science majors with non-science majors on the type of life lesson that fictional stories teach (2016)

17%

13%

29%

4.8%

67%

71%

Figure 3 depicts the opinion of the type of lesson (or lack thereof) taught by fictional stories in general by CMU students on March 18th, 2016. No life lesson being taught by fiction, represented as the green pie slice above, diminished in percentage among the CMU students with non-science majors, despite outnumbering the CMU students with science majors by three (24 vs. 21). The importance of this finding cannot be understated because those with non-science majors tend to spend more time developing literary and art knowledge – especially those with English majors and minors (3 CMU students with English minors voted in this survey). One CMU student with a science major notated that he or she writes in their spare time and many science majors indicated that they enjoy reading, so their opinions should not be overlooked. That said, each group shares similar perspective and interests to a certain extent – those with non-science majors may be more experienced in probing fictional stories for a specific lesson and possess different critical thinking skills.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS SECTION

As the CMU students that participated in this survey indicate, extended metaphor persuaded them more because of further description and not critical thinking skills – in fact, the latter attribute received the lowest marks, which seems completely wrong to me. Even though a more elaborate description provides an extended metaphor with an outstanding benefit, it means nothing if a reader fails to notice the extended metaphor. Just noticing one individual extended metaphor may not be enough because they tend to continue well past the obvious and re-emerge at later point(s) in the story. Depending on how the story has progressed, a reader can relate all of the interconnected individual metaphors hitherto and use them as a scaffolding to logically speculate about an author’s purpose. This takes immense cognitive effort on the reader’s part, as described by Oswald and Rihs: “extended metaphors appear to be demanding in terms of effort, since understanding them… involve[s] signiﬁcant cognitive processing…What an extended metaphor does, then, is encourage the addressee to keep on exploring several aspects of the proposed metaphor” (p. 139-140). A critically thinking reader may have an understanding that differs from what the fictional author attempted to achieve through prose, but that’s not the point. I engaged in critical thought processes to understand *Life of Pi* and *The Metamorphosis*, then extrapolated extended metaphors from them, and finally wrote out representative simple metaphors for a basis of comparison. Perhaps this constitutes a large reason why critical thinking was ranked so low – I may have removed the critical thinking component from the survey.

In addition, a perspective of a completely different purpose could be expressed to an author that may not necessarily have occurred to them. According to Deal (1968), “it is the rare critic who can or will probe beneath that surface to discover the underground movement and meaning of the story itself. The rest simply do not look for it” (p. 296). A fictional author could respond with a comment like, “Wow, I never thought of that, but it is a good point. Even though I wrote that particular story with a specific purpose, I could see it being a reason for my writing!” When a reader actually takes the time to delve into the depths of their brain and exercise that thin yet remarkable gray cortex matter involved in complex reasoning, they can learn so much about a fictional story and its author. That said, perhaps the survey contained too much personal bias, not enough choices, or other flaws. Within a few minutes after collecting the surveys from my CMU peers, I noticed an extremely biased project description on the survey:

To better learn about the persuasive effects of extended metaphor in literary works, a survey will strengthen this paper by providing information that will hopefully compliment the research conducted from secondary sources.

This may have actually caused the results to favor extended metaphor as a more effective

literary persuasive device over simple metaphor, but more importantly, reduced students’ opinion of critical thinking. A neutral survey title could have granted survey respondents more autonomy in terms of not worrying of what benefited me and my immediate sub goal (to prove that extended metaphors are more persuasive than simple metaphors).

Notwithstanding, survey respondents could have been acting as appeasers for a few other reasons that include: divided attention, less focus, lack of time, and poor reading ability. Speaking of the latter two reasons in this list, they may help explain why only 34 votes were tallied for the critical thinking option in figure 2. After all, for that particular survey question involving the sequential rank of extended metaphor benefits: 12 CMU students only checked one box (didn’t rank the options), 1 student checked 2 boxes (more description and evoke more emotion), and 2 students did not rank or check at all. If a student really was pressed for time, they could have made that known rather than failing to rank the 4 options. Moving on to figure 3, notice the three choices on the kind of lesson that fiction teaches: moral lesson, another lesson, or no lesson. I realize now that the lack of choices represents another survey flaw – but it actually provided a great conclusion to draw upon: why didn’t anyone else spot this as well? After all, survey respondents were not shy about giving their opinions. Critical thinking skills were not exercised by survey respondents for this question (and myself when writing it), because at least a fourth option (it depends on the story) and a “check all that apply” description should have been included.

This study has showed that critical thinking skills, considered to be both a benefit and flaw of extended metaphor, arguably pose the most important benefit that allows extended metaphor to persuade readers of fiction. Critical thinking is persuasion, thanks to extended metaphor.

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